

QUALITY MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION



A NEBRASKA PERSPECTIVE

Nebraska Department of Education

Quality Middle Grades Education:

A Nebraska Perspective

What's in a Middle Grade Kid?

*What's in a middle grade kid you ask?
The feelings, the thoughts, the freedom at last,
Feelings of love and feelings of hate,
Feelings that second hour you're going to be late,
Homework, teachers, and even some friends,
Hoping and wishing that the day won't end,
Wanting to leave, but wanting to stay,
Telling people nicely to get out of your way,
Competing for friends and popularity,
Trying to be all you can be.
What's in a middle grade kid you ask?
The feelings, the thoughts, the freedom at last!*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
FOREWORD	i
MIDDLE GRADES TASK FORCE	11
INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of this Guide	1
The Historical Perspective	1
Education for the Middle Grade Learner ...	2
A Middle Grades Scenario	3
Middle Grades in Nebraska	4
DESCRIPTION OF THE MIDDLE GRADES STUDENT	5
Who Are Middle Grades Students?	5
Physical Development of Young Adolescents	6
Intellectual Development of Young Adolescents	7
Emotional Development of Young Adolescents	7
Social Development of Young Adolescents	8
Our Goal in Nebraska	9
LIST OF QUALITY INDICATORS .	10
INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAMS	12
Mission	12
The Principal	13
Staffing	14
A Time of Transition	15
Curriculum	16
Scheduling the Program	18
Instructional Strategies	20
Learning Climate	23
Classroom Management	23
Assessment and Evaluation	24
Advisory Services	25
Activities	26
Professional Development	27
Family, Community, and School Relationships	28
DEVELOPING A NEBRASKA MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAM	30
Guideline for Developing a Middle Grades Program	31
REFERENCES ...	32

FOREWORD

Young adolescent learners are very capable and dynamic learners. Their learning abilities and needs range widely and are continuously changing. As a result, they require careful guidance and support as they move from childhood to adulthood.

These learners, between the ages of 10 and 15, experience tremendous physical, social, emotional and intellectual change. The varied patterns of growth create enormous diversity among them. Yet, as a group, they still have more in common with each other than with elementary or high school students.

Across Nebraska, there is an expanding commitment by educators and school communities to develop middle grades programs which are more responsive to the young adolescent student. In support of Nebraska schools, the Nebraska State Accreditation Committee and the Nebraska Council on Teacher Education requested that a study be conducted on the educational needs of the young adolescent. The resulting document, *Quality Middle Grades Education: A Nebraska Perspective*, is intended to guide Nebraska educators, families, and communities in providing quality programs for middle grades students.

The Nebraska Department of Education acknowledges each member of the research Task Force for their efforts and commitment. Their contributions to this study, and to the students of Nebraska, are commended.



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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Purpose of this Guide

Quality Middle Grades Education: A Nebraska Perspective was written by a team of Nebraska educators under the sponsorship of the Nebraska Department of Education. The team researched quality middle grades educational programs, analyzed the research, and offers helpful evidence to support the concept of middle grades programs designed specifically for young adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15 years of age. The purposes of this guide are: (1) to describe, in common language, the indicators of quality one should expect to find in Nebraska middle grades education, and (2) to assist citizens, parents, school board members, school administrators, teachers and students to design and implement quality educational programs for middle grades learners.

A quotation graces the bulletin board in the office of an educator; “Children are the messages we send to a time we shall not see.” The author is unknown, yet the message speaks volumes; it is a message of hope and commitment to the present and the future! This we know to be true: both family and society find in children promises for brighter tomorrows. Because of these promises, the education of all youngsters is a paramount responsibility of the society into which they were born. Families and schools share the burden and joy of nurturing the intellectual, emotional, social and physical growth of children.

Historical Perspective

The Historical Perspective

Every society establishes a formalized system for the education of its young. Today’s diverse societies want and need well educated citizens who can interact with others to participate in the ongoing development of the society, to be responsible for themselves and others, and to find meaningful work, leisure, and cultural activities. Communities and families, along with professional educators have shared the responsibility for assisting the young to learn how to read, write, compute, and reason

so they may eventually participate in the broader context of social, political, and economic affairs.

Public and private elementary and secondary schools have served to educate American children for several centuries. The elementary schools are firmly committed to helping children learn basic intellectual and social skills, while the high schools offer a wide array of opportunities for students to identify specialized interests and build on their individual strengths.

In the early part of the 20th century--1910-1912--junior high schools were created to provide an educational link between the elementary school and the high school. The program at most junior high schools was constructed around the educational skills students would need as they entered high school, an expansion of the elementary curriculum with some exploration included. Junior high students were discovered to be much different from elementary or high school students! Those differences led to a unique school designed for students who knew change as a constant companion. This unique school, the "middle school," began in the late 1960's.

Middle Grades Education

*is a concept more than
it is a place. . .*

Education for the Middle Grades Learner

Why is education for middle grades learners an important issue? The authors of *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995), a publication of The National Middle School Association, remind us that young adolescents, those between the ages of 10 and 15 years of age, undergo more profound physical and emotional changes than at any other time of their lives. The onset of puberty, dissimilar rates of physical and emotional maturation, the expansion of the intellect, the transition from childhood to early adulthood, make the middle years enormously challenging for young adolescents as well as their parents, friends, and teachers.

Middle grades education is a concept more than it is a "place." A program designed for the development of middle grade learners reflects the unique needs of its clientele. Because middle grade learners are different from their elementary and high school counterparts, their educational programs recognize and address those

differences. Programs for middle grade learners stress academic achievement, responsibility, reliability, and cooperation through teamwork while recognizing the differences that exist within and among the student population. Quality middle grades programs provide the opportunity to explore wide ranging topics in the safety of a supportive instructional team environment.

A Middle Grades Scenario

*When middle grades
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A Middle Grades Scenario

Educators with high expectations for students populate the teaching cadre of a quality middle grades program. They understand the students with whom they have chosen to work. Quality middle grades teachers make the choice to teach young adolescents and they have prepared themselves to do so. They appreciate the enthusiasm, the curiosity, the questions, and the antics of middle grade learners.

Young adolescents are capable people. They want to learn and to explore the world as it is opening up to them. They are curious about lots of things, including themselves. Young adolescents understand they are changing and need adults who believe in them. These adults provide appropriate challenges, support, and a wide range of educational activities. The students want and need to be actively engaged in their own learning.

When middle grades teachers and students come together, there is a sense of excitement about learning. The learning environment is charged; it is active and paced to meet the individual levels of understanding.

Teachers are responsive to student needs and students live up to the expectations established by their learning teams. There are opportunities to try again if the lesson isn't successful at first. This provides an environment that builds confidence in learning! Above all, there is real learning--the kind that comes from hard work and serious study.

The educational journey begins at home and continues with a home-school partnership. The middle grades are the part of the educational journey where a steady course must be steered; where essential skills are practiced, necessary adjustments made, and learning

extended. New skills are introduced so the discoveries that lie ahead can be handled effectively. Quality middle grades programs provide a secure environment from which to view the universe while allowing curiosity and knowledge to expand.

Middle Grades in Nebraska

Middle Grades in Nebraska

Middle grades are defined by Nebraska accreditation standards in Rule 10 (*Regulations and Procedures for the Accreditation of Schools*) as any grades from four through nine that are designated by the school system as middle grades. In practice, middle grades typically include grades seven and eight, with configurations of six through eight or seven through nine being common.

Nebraska accreditation standards, required for all public schools and optional for nonpublic schools, encourage the development of middle grades programs that build upon the content of the elementary grades; provide a strong academic program; extend learning experiences; and provide exploratory experiences in vocational areas, foreign language, and technology education. Students are guaranteed that, through accreditation, a foundational level of educational opportunities is available to them. Accreditation cannot, however, insure the quality of those guaranteed educational opportunities. The quality of the opportunities in the middle grades program derives from a clear mission and from the implementation of that mission.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MIDDLE GRADES STUDENT

Who Are They?

*Regardless of their cultural
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exists among youngsters.
What is “common” in a child’s
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Who Are Middle Grades Students?

Middle grade students are young adolescents between the ages of ten and fifteen. Middle grade students are neither elementary nor secondary students; they are members of a unique middle tier in education. When asked to describe the students who are in the middle grades in Nebraska, the questions become numerous. Who’s describing that student: parents, peers, friends, teachers, community members? What is the time of day, day of the week, week of the month, or month of the year? Where is the student: in the classroom, in the school hallway, at the shopping mall, in the school cafeteria, at athletic practice, with parents, with siblings, with friends, with a teacher, in the principal’s office, or gathering on main street? How old is the student: ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen? Is this a boy or a girl? Any combination of answers paints a different student profile. The middle grades program must be designed to help them all and help them as they are.

Author and teacher Nancie Atwell says of her eighth grade, twelve- to thirteen-year-old students:

“Because they respond to me in such varied ways, I’ve stopped trying to anticipate my eighth graders’ entering behavior. All I can predict with any certainty about any class is the widest imaginable range of abilities, problems, attitudes, and levels of maturity. My kids are boys who play tag on the school grounds, and boys who grow moustaches. They’re girls who slip and call me Mom in class, and girls who come to school wearing more eye shadow than I’d thought humanly possible. . . .” Pg. 27.

More students from varying family backgrounds are attending our schools. More students with wider academic interests and a wider range of communication abilities are found in our middle grades than ever before. Regardless of their gender, chronological age, and cultural background, variability exists among youngsters. Dissimilar rates of growth are common in all areas of development. What is “common” in a child’s day out of school may be shared by fewer students. Therefore, learning has to be more individualized through increased understanding of the needs of middle grades learners.

Young adolescents experience tremendous physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes. The changes do not occur in a predictable or regular pattern, and the areas of development intertwine. Characteristics of students in these developmental areas must be recognized and addressed in order to maximize successful learning.

Physical Development

Physical Development of Young Adolescents

Physical development is marked by uneven growth spurts. The rate of development and physical appearances differ. Physically, some young adolescents may seem out of proportion.

Young adolescents need opportunities for frequent movement. Levels of motor coordination, endurance, strength, and flexibility vary considerably. There are abrupt transitions from alertness and excessive energy to fatigue and lethargy. Changing bodies require increased levels of nutrition and rest, yet finding suitable diets and schedules are challenging. The most important consideration in physical development is the great diversity among young adolescent students.

Intellectual Development

Young adolescents are intensely curious about things that interest them.

Intellectual Development of Young Adolescents

Intellectually, young adolescents are undergoing rapid changes. A wide range of intellectual abilities, from the concrete to the abstract, is observed. They are moving away from total reliance on their own concrete experiences toward the ability to consider alternatives.

As abilities develop, the same student may be operating concretely in one subject area and abstractly in another subject area. The ability to understand and explain *how* they know *what* they know, is increasing. These young people are willing to learn what they consider useful and relevant.

Young adolescents are intensely curious about things that interest them. However, their interests change frequently. These changes in interests, coupled with their desire to try many different activities, affect the instructional program and how the program is structured.

The changes in intellectual development do not take place in a continuous, forward progression. Rather, students may experience radical variances from very concrete to very abstract during any given day. Middle grade teachers face many challenges in creating an instructional program which takes into account the students' differences in intellectual development: the differences from student to student, and from day to day.

Emotional Development

Emotional Development of Young Adolescents

Emotionally, this is a time of great chemical and hormonal imbalances. The body changes that are normal in physical development have a considerable impact on emotional development. Physical changes frequently cause young adolescents to worry about their appearance. Such worry often results in confusion or self-consciousness. Early adolescents are idealistic. Although many look like adults, they may be very

childlike emotionally and may show great ranges in emotional highs and lows. An intense need for personal safety as well as a secure and safe family unit exists. As early adolescents become more aware of themselves as individuals, the school provides the avenue for measurement against peers. Many young adolescents, using peer comparisons as their indicator of personal normalcy, are dissatisfied and unrealistically self-critical. They are easily offended and often misconstrue any statement as a personal attack on some imagined personal shortcoming. Privacy is needed to sort through events and feelings.

Most young adolescents are optimistic and hopeful, although some exhibit argumentative tendencies because they are unable to see things from other points of view. They are developing a sense of humor. Generally, the objects of their humorous attempts are others: peers, people less fortunate than themselves, and their teachers. As a result, sarcasm may invade remarks intended to express humor.

Young adolescents are often concerned about the developmental changes they are experiencing and trying to understand them. The middle grades program must recognize and support the fragile emotions of this age group.

Social Development

*Young adolescents
seek adults who will value
their questions and who
will listen to them talk.*

Social Development of Young Adolescents

Socially, young adolescents are very family oriented, however, they are becoming more peer influenced. Friends and conformity to peer groups are becoming the barometers of success. At times they are more interested in what society will do for them rather than how they can contribute to society. These youngsters are very often self-conscious and can be influenced by social fads, and they may overreact or question adult standards and viewpoints regarding many issues. At the same time, they seek supportive, stable home environments and family security. They are dependent upon parents for purchasing power, transportation, and all other major needs. In the quest to define who they are, the characteristics of honesty, integrity, citizenship, volunteerism, and work ethic also are scrutinized. Students look inward and outward as they consider ethical decisions, and often come to adults with large,

unanswerable questions about the meaning of life. They seek adults who will value the importance of these questions and who will listen to them talk. The home, the faith communities, and the school are supports that adolescents rely upon for character development. However, other role models may be adopted in the search for social approval. Young adolescent gang membership is an unfortunate example.

Nebraska's Goal

Our Goal in Nebraska

Our goal in Nebraska should be to insure challenging, supportive middle grades programs where our young adolescents will experience successful physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth. To achieve this goal, quality middle grades programs must be constructed on a solid foundation. This foundation is presented as *Indicators of Quality* in the following section.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN MIDDLE LEVEL PROGRAMS

Mission:

The middle grades program has a strong, meaningful, commonly shared mission.

The Principal:

The principal leads the staff, students, families, and community in accomplishing the middle grades mission.

Staffing:

Teachers have knowledge and understanding of middle grades students and a strong desire to promote growth and learning.

A Time of Transition:

The middle grades program supports students in making successful transitions.

Curriculum:

The curriculum is challenging, balanced and supports the mission.

Scheduling the Program:

The school day is varied and flexible to best meet the learning needs of middle grades students.

Instructional Strategies:

Instructional strategies are designed to keep students active and fully engaged in learning.

Learning Climate:

A climate of trust exists between students and adults.

Classroom Management:

Quality instruction and engaged learning are key to effective classroom management.

Assessment and Evaluation:

Assessment and evaluation of student progress are continuous and appropriate to the learning activity.

Advisory Services:

Advisory Services that enhance the instructional program and support learning, safety and wellness are available to the middle grades student.

Middle Grades Activities:

Students experience success in physical, social, and service activities.

Professional Development:

Middle grades staff continue their own education through formal staff development, networking, personal study, and research.

Family, Community, and School Relationships:

Caring for middle grades students takes a combined effort by the school, the family, and the community.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAMS

The mission and program for the education of middle grade learners should respond positively and directly to the needs and characteristics of young adolescents by supporting students in transition between childhood and adolescence and by recognizing the special skills, talents and abilities of these students. Specific indicators can be used to identify quality middle grades programs. Here is what to look for:

Mission

Mission: The middle grades program has a strong, meaningful, commonly shared mission.

The mission is key to a quality middle grades program. An indicator of what is highly valued, the mission serves as the foundation for the curriculum. The mission guides the length, breadth, and content of the middle grades program and activities. Written as a statement, the mission must express caring for the student and proficiency in subject matter as equal concerns. Foremost, the mission must recognize the uniqueness of early adolescence and embrace the diversity in students.

The mission serves as the foundation for the middle grades program.

The mission should be cooperatively developed by the community, administration, and faculty to ensure a broad base of ownership and a high degree of relevance. The mission has to be real, with contemporary local factors written into it. The community should work along with the middle grades educators to acknowledge the range of current concerns and agree upon those ideas that would serve both short term and long term success of middle grades education. The mission statement will articulate the educational purpose of the middle grades program in clear, concise, and understandable terms.

The mission statement should be understood by all the middle grades faculty and have both that faculty and the district's commitment. The statement should also have approval at the superintendent and school board level. A

The Principal

*The improvement of
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the principal.*

major premise of the mission statement is that *all young adolescent students can be successful at learning*. When the principal and teachers agree upon this premise, then the middle grades philosophy can work.

The Principal: The principal leads the staff, students, families, and community in accomplishing the middle grades mission.

“Leading other leaders” is a key role of the middle grades principal. Effective leadership by the principal is critical in the establishment and maintenance of a quality middle grades program. The principal encourages and develops the leadership of others.

Clear, informed visions for quality middle grades programs are supported by the principal. Building on the vision, the principal leads others in developing a strong school mission and challenging goals. The principal makes certain that the mission and goals support the diversity in young adolescent learners and their changing needs. Also, the principal leads staff, family, community, and students toward the accomplishment of the mission and goals.

The improvement of student performance is the focus of significant decisions made by the principal. The principal is firmly grounded in the knowledge of “best practice” and in the sound teaching and learning processes that support all students. A sincere commitment to the welfare and progress of student performance is held by the principal.

A strong curriculum which is rigorous, challenging, and developmentally appropriate is of high priority to the principal. The principal continually examines pertinent information to assess whether program goals and objectives are being met. By establishing high expectations for teaching and learning, the principal promotes in students a positive self-image and the belief of being capable.

A learning climate that is based on trust and high expectations for both students and staff is paramount to the principal. Through personal modeling and sound leadership, the principal assures a learning environment

where every student can experience success. The school schedule reflects certain priorities that support the mission and goals of the middle grades program. The principal incorporates the priorities into the program schedule. For example, such priorities may include common planning time for teacher teams, a common group of students, flexible use of time, exploratory experiences for all students, and heterogeneous grouping of students. The principal successfully constructs the program schedule to balance the mission and goals with available resources.

Recruiting the most qualified staff for all positions in the middle grades program is accomplished by the principal. Staff assignments are based on the diverse needs of the middle grades learner. The principal leads the planning and organization of staff development opportunities.

The principal communicates clearly and effectively. Priorities regarding the quality middle grades program are distinctly articulated. The principal leads an open and free interactive communication process between students, staff, family, and community.

Staffing

Staffing: Teachers have knowledge and understanding of middle grades students and a strong desire to promote growth and learning.

...teachers in the middle grades must believe that they are teaching in the most exciting and influential level of education.

In Nebraska schools, due to varied numbers of students, building configurations, and general demographics, staffing patterns vary considerably. Exemplary staffing patterns include teachers working collaboratively as instructional teams, flexibility in instructional groupings, collaboration among teachers across teaching specialties, and a common time for team planning. A common planning time allows teachers to integrate instruction across curricular areas and to work together to address the student's developmental needs. Regardless of school size, teachers in the middle grades must believe that they are teaching in the most exciting and influential level of education and are sharing in the program leadership. They have to be committed to young adolescents and know they can meet the challenges of the students in their charge.

A middle grades instructional team is responsible for a common group of students. The teachers in the team function under shared leadership. It is helpful to have a team leader who will guide the organization and direction of the team. A team can be, as a minimum, the combination of two teachers given joint responsibility for a group of students, or as large as is needed for the specific objectives of a school. From the vision and goals of the team come collaboration for curriculum and resources.

Teacher attitude has an enormous influence on how students perceive their teachers and the subjects they teach. Middle grades students want and need to believe in their teachers. Therefore, it is important that teachers understand the diversity in young adolescent students and the many transitions that each student is facing.

A Time of Transition

A Time of Transition: The middle grades program supports students in making successful transitions.

The middle grades program must support the student in making transitions.

Transition is the movement of a student from a familiar, supportive environment to one that has unknown implications; an event almost always couched in anxiety. Transitional times create new stresses. Two very dramatic transitions are those of leaving elementary education and beginning middle grades education and then leaving middle grades education and entering the high school learning environment. The middle grades program must support the student in making these significant transitions.

The transition from elementary to middle grades is a major transition, especially if students are moving to a new building. Students naturally have fear of the unknown. They don't know what to expect in the pending middle grades experience. Schools should provide accurate and timely information to elementary students concerning the move to middle grades and the new expectations. To aid in the transition process, schools may wish to establish a transition team to help students make this move in a positive and secure manner. The transition team should consist of teachers from the elementary grades and the high school grades.

Communication among the elementary, middle, and high school staff will aid each level in understanding the others' concerns, philosophies, and objectives.

Another significant transition for middle grades students is from one grade level to the next. Each year in middle grades is a new experience and a change. There are all the unknowns associated with moving from one grade level to the next. Constant new challenges are the only stable expectation.

The final transition for middle grades students is the move to high school. Many of the fears that surfaced with the move from an elementary school arise again with the transition to a high school. Students are again concerned about failure, keeping up with assignments, getting lost in the building, making a presentation, and how they will look in front of their peers. As students prepare to move to high school, the issues that concern the students must be addressed in some way. Often middle grades staff will arrange transitional activities during the spring semester to ready students for high school. Transitional information empowers students to prepare for the unknown.

Curriculum

Curriculum: The curriculum is challenging, balanced and supports the school mission.

Curriculum is an important vehicle for achieving the middle grades mission. Commonly, curriculum refers to the content and skills typically included in subjects or courses. A strong curriculum builds upon the content of the elementary grades, is intellectually challenging, and extends the depth of learning experiences. For each middle grade, the curriculum should include instruction in reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health, art, music, and physical education. Writing experiences should be incorporated into all curricular areas. Access to and appropriate use of technology should also be included throughout the middle grades program.

Opportunities to explore vocational areas and foreign languages are integral to a quality curricular program. The instructional program, aimed at the student's level of understanding, should enable students to assume control of their learning and should establish achievable, yet challenging goals.

The curriculum of a responsive middle grades program results in a student who is intellectually reflective.

The curriculum must carefully balance the academic goals with the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents. The curriculum of a quality middle grades program is presented to students in an integrative and exploratory pattern. An integrated curriculum is no longer a series of separate, unrelated subjects. Rather, an integrated curriculum assists students in understanding the relationships between the academic disciplines. Individual teachers, or teams of teachers, utilize teaching methods that are designed to make connections among the content of the curricular areas, and to connect the content and skills they teach to the daily lives of their students. Exploratory programs broaden students' experiences in content and topics while they pursue, or explore, their interests and talents. Exploratory programs may be organized into high interest, short term activities, experiences, or courses. Integrative and exploratory methods for providing the curriculum, based on meeting individual student needs, strongly support the theme of middle grades learning.

Designing a curriculum appropriate for middle grade learners is an important responsibility. The curriculum of a developmentally responsive middle grades program results in a student who is intellectually reflective. Students realize that education allows them to become responsible leaders who can understand the value for citizenship and who develop skills for work, including collaboration and conflict resolution. Through an appropriate body of knowledge, one that challenges student thinking, the middle grades student creates solutions to problems. Methods for providing the curricular content should enable students to remain actively engaged in their learning.

Scheduling the Program

A varied and flexible schedule is at the heart of the middle grades program. The schedule should strongly support the active involvement of the student in the learning process.

Scheduling the Program: The school day is varied and flexible to best meet the learning needs of middle grades students.

A varied and flexible schedule is at the heart of the middle grades program. The scheduling of learning activities within the program should firmly support the individual learner. A quality middle grades schedule is meant to support the academic success of each student by allowing the teacher to work more closely with individual students in more than one subject area. Scheduling, to be effective, must be a collaborative effort between the middle grades leadership and staff.

Continuous progress, the ongoing process of measuring a student's progress toward a goal or objective, reflects the uniqueness of the individual learner. Grouping and regrouping students are integral parts of continuous progress. The schedule must support a process for teachers to periodically regroup students both within a classroom and within the larger middle grades program. The strategy of grouping can effectively use students' strengths while making fewer demands in their areas of weakness. Changing groupings should keep students from being labeled according to their strengths or weaknesses. Friendships are continuously being formed and this regrouping meets the needs of academic inquiry and social development. Simultaneously, good balance is necessary; too frequent changes limit the stability needed at this level.

No single schedule or formula for an instructional organization fits all middle grades programs. A rigidly set amount of time for instruction repeated over and over again with academic areas being taught in isolation does not support the mission of middle grades education or simulate the real way students learn. The schedule should be varied and flexible to best meet the learning needs of middle grades students.

There are various ways to organize the school day (schedule). Working with others, working on individual projects, and working alone to find evidence to solve simple to complex academic problems require a varied and flexible schedule. The strengths and needs of the young adolescent learner should ultimately shape the

school schedule. Also, the school schedule should strongly support the active involvement of the student in the learning process. The following are examples of organizational patterns which support a quality middle grades program.

Block Scheduling

Block scheduling – a longer period of instructional time than traditional class periods, usually 90 to 110 minutes in length. Longer periods of time provide students the opportunity to become truly engaged in their learning. Block scheduling provides uninterrupted time for students to participate in teacher directed learning experiences, through investigations, research, demonstrations and other instructional methods which support the learning needs of middle grades students.

Back-To-Back Schedule

Back-to-back schedule – an organization of class periods that provide additional flexibility within a more traditional or departmentalized schedule. In this framework, class periods (time blocks) are increased from one to two or more. Teams of teachers exchange groups of students in consecutive time blocks, or they may keep the same group of students for two (or more) consecutive time blocks. Such scheduling encourages learning experiences which actively engage students for longer, uninterrupted periods of time.

Flexible Schedule

Flexible schedule – an arrangement and re-arrangement of class periods to provide scheduling options within the school day. Examples of a “flexibly scheduled daily schedule” include the rotation of classes, alternate day classes, the incorporation of block scheduling for determined periods of time, or other means of organizing the school day to accommodate comprehensive learning activities.

Dropped Schedule

Dropped schedule – a scheduling pattern where not every course meets every day of the week. In a dropped schedule, students may be scheduled for more classes than there are class periods. For example, a student may be scheduled for eight classes, but only seven meet on any given day. One class (in a seven-period day) is dropped in order to add the eighth class.

Minutes

Minutes – an organization of the middle grades program which is patterned around total minutes, not class periods in the school day. Organizing the school day

around minutes provides maximum flexibility in scheduling. Once the number of minutes needed for each area of the curriculum is determined, the minutes can be allotted over the five day school week. For example, instruction is best supported when the number of minutes given to a particular subject is increased in one day, while the same period of time is given to another subject the following day. Such scheduling patterns may provide larger blocks of time for varied learning activities.

Teacher Based

Teacher Based (Self Contained) – an organization of the program where the individual teacher designs the daily student schedule into an appropriate plan. The teacher and student, together, may design the following day's learning sequence.

Concept Driven

Concept Driven – an organizational pattern which allows the concepts under consideration to influence the amount of time and number of days that will be used to gain needed knowledge and skills. Teachers and students develop a working study plan for the duration of the project. Use of the learning center or media center may need to be planned into the instructional time periods. Study groups may need varied periods of time given the depth of inquiry necessary in completing the assigned task.

A successful schedule reflects the continuous, collaborative effort between the middle grades leadership and staff. Instructional strategies should be varied and flexible, designed to meet the unique learning needs of middle grades students. The school schedule must, therefore, be flexible to support the creative and varying instructional methods intended to actively engage students in their learning.

Instructional Strategies

Instructional Strategies: Instructional strategies are designed to keep students active and fully engaged in learning.

The methods involved in the middle grades curriculum vary as do the ability and learning styles of the individual student. Experiments, demonstrations, simulations, and independent study combined with direct instruction and group work serve to stimulate

*Instructional strategies
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learners. Students will learn as they see the value of the learning activity; as they consider the information and skills being presented; and as they are challenged at the level that allows for adventure and security. A well planned lesson considers student ability, background, cultural diversity and individual needs.

Instructional strategies shape the quality of the educational experience of the school day. The program's effectiveness is heavily influenced by the instructional strategies and classroom management skills of the middle grades teacher. The instruction which takes place in the middle grades classroom has to support academic development and growth. The skills and achievements of the young adolescent are distributed along a wide range of possibilities. Learning does not take place in a uniform manner, but rather is a by-product of various levels of readiness, and personal abilities and attitudes. Instruction should engage the learner actively in the learning task.

Curriculum and instructional practices should be monitored. The length of the activity must support the expected outcome. Some sitting and listening is justifiable in the middle school day, but sitting and listening all day is not justifiable. The depth of the academic investigation needs to be related to the importance of the concept being studied and the reasoning potential of the students.

Because of the constantly changing development of young adolescents, there is a need for middle grades teachers to change, adapt, or modify their strategies for working with their students. Providing resources and opportunities for teachers to examine new ideas and methods for instruction becomes not just an ideal situation, but is instead necessary for maintaining excellence in the classroom.

Both what is studied and how it is studied are important. Good instruction can overcome weak curricula; strong curricula cannot overcome poor instruction. The following are examples of ways in which middle grades teachers demonstrate effective classroom teaching.

Time on Task

Time on task: Middle grades teachers have a design for keeping students on task for the class period. The design should, as a central goal, increase time on task by the young adolescent learner. Not all activities will allow for total time on task. The key factor is to have the event and the method engage the student to the optimum. Trivial activities that hold only fleeting engagement should be avoided because they lead to a minimal amount of engaged time and lessen the impact of the learning period. Just as the material has to be individualized, so does the planned method.

Engaged Time

Engaged time: The time spent in middle grades classrooms for young adolescents should be time spent as an active participant in learning. Effective teachers plan for situations, topics, and concepts that make sense, are real, and elicit student response and keep students interested.

Learning Activities

Learning activities: Within an instructional period the concepts to be learned must be presented through meaningful activities for the young adolescents. These activities must relate to the students' world, revolving around their interests and needs. Students engaged in the construction of materials which support ideas and skills previously learned enjoy the satisfaction of producing something which can be displayed after the activity has ended. This type of active learning is strongly supported by the young adolescent learner.

Teacher Presence

Teacher presence: Effective middle grades teachers are omnipresent. They are everywhere and in control at all times. Constantly monitoring the classroom, teachers quickly move to students who need help, direction, and discipline. The teacher is comfortable in a mass of middle grades students, whether it is keeping an eye on hallway progress, attending a sporting event, or sparking an intellectual challenge in the classroom.

Controlled Choice

Controlled choice: Middle grades students should begin to work in controlled choice situations, set goals, understand their own thinking, use strengths, and identify areas that need improvement. If middle grades teachers accept students as they are and develop an academic plan which supports students, then all students can be successful at learning. This plan will involve a range of individualized choices for students

centered around basic concepts, building on students' strengths and teaching to students' weaknesses. This allows students to make selections that are safe and supporting of the individual's learning.

Learning Climate

Learning Climate: A climate of trust exists between students and adults.

A safe learning environment is the only place a developing young adolescent can successfully learn. Teachers provide opportunities for interactions that are intellectually, emotionally, physically, and socially secure as perceived by the student. This is paramount to building the trust between students and adults. A learning environment that fosters trust between students and adults and encourages students to confidently explore their learning capabilities is considered a safe learning environment.

Teachers are advocates and mentors for students. A well planned curricular program, including the schedule and teaching methods, protects students from a fragmented learning experience. Larger schools create smaller learning environments to support young adolescent learners. The wide range of student diversity is welcome in a caring and supportive learning environment. Students trust teachers to embrace their diversity.

Classroom Management

Classroom Management: Quality instruction and engaged learning are key to effective classroom management.

Effective classroom management is built upon quality instruction and engaged learning.

Effective classroom management is built upon quality instruction and engaged learning. Most young adolescents have the ability to be responsible for their behavior if they are given the guidelines and are provided controlled choice. The teacher, through effective instruction and classroom management, assists students in being responsible, engaged learners.

The middle grades educator must teach and control classroom conduct with equal energy. Young adolescents are curious, creative, and like to delve into experimental behavior. The program's design and instructional

procedure must use this intellectual curiosity as a stimulus and a guide for engaged learning. It is imperative that students be engaged in learning; off task behavior can sometimes cause non-productive involvement. There should also be no doubt as to the expected responsible behavior in relation to the high quality of academic challenges being provided for the young adolescent student.

Unconditional acceptance of each student is the responsibility of every middle grades teacher. This acceptance will necessitate the collaborative setting of goals with students. The formation of, and agreement on, established goals are crucial to the continued academic development of the student. Within the setting of goals, it is imperative that each goal is attainable by the students involved. The instructional procedure should leave no doubt in the student's mind about the warmth, caring, and respect for the student on the part of the teacher and program.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation of student progress are continuous and appropriate to the learning activity.

Assessment and evaluation must reflect the middle grades mission. Students should be provided with options for assessment which are geared toward the individualization of assignments and are compatible with the range of students' abilities and needs. Student self evaluation combined with teacher devised measurement support goals for learning.

Due to the nature of the young adolescent, new and varied forms of assessment should become a part of the evaluation process. Because middle grades students are active learners, a performance-based assessment would be an effective measure of evaluation. Performance allows for the concrete understanding of young adolescents to come alive in presentation. Middle grades students have a good sense of now. They are very present-oriented. Therefore, varied forms of assessment, which combine real situations with academic skills to be learned, are very appropriate for this level.

Advisory Services

Advisory Services: Advisory Services that enhance the instructional program and support learning, safety and wellness are available to the middle grades student.

Quality middle grades programs support learning, safety, and wellness. These programs are anchored by advisory services.

Advisory services assure that students have at least one significant adult with whom to relate.

Advisory services assure that students have at least one significant adult with whom to relate and who can provide other advisory options. The young adolescent tends to be very “here and now” oriented. An adult acting as a coach can talk individually with students at times through the day and can bring adult logic to questions of the value of education, the acquisition of additional learning skills and concerns about friendship. The concerns of transition into the new grade level, within the grade levels, and of leaving the middle grades can be discussed and investigated in small groups with an adult to provide accurate information for consideration. An advisory component planned by the faculty and supported by the community and administration in design and content can be extremely useful in increasing the educational success of the young adolescent.

Advisory services may be provided in a variety of ways. Sometimes students of a single grade level are placed together to discuss concerns that have normally evolved from that grade, curriculum, and activities. Sometimes grouping by gender for special topics of discussion relating to unique curriculum concerns or social concerns is best. Some programs find success in keeping the advisory groups and the advisors together for the duration of the middle grades program. Multi-grade combinations of two or more grades sometimes offer the best arrangement for the support of learning by learners who have “been there” and are preparing to leave the unit. The underlying intent is to involve all teachers in the advisory services to best meet the changing needs of students.

The roles and responsibilities of an advisor/coach will vary with each program. These roles should be spelled out clearly prior to starting the program. An advisory

steering committee may be beneficial. Members from each grade level should take part along with members of the building administration and community. Outside presenters can be considered for special topics. Time and location for the advising activities should be discussed. The nature of the topics should be decided ahead of time and scripts or short lesson plans developed for these interactive group discussions. An evaluation plan needs to be developed and agreed upon just as the faculty would with any other curricular area.

Activities

Middle Grades Activities: Students experience success in physical, social, and service activities.

Middle grades activities should support the “wholeness” of the developing learner. Middle grades students need and want opportunities to try new experiences. An effective way to offer new and varied experiences is through an organized activity program. This program must reflect the mission of the school and should offer a balance between social, educational, and service activities which provide for life long learning. Opportunities to explore and participate in activities should be based on student interests. Prerequisites should not exist as barriers for activity participation. Activities may be provided through such examples as:

- ✓ A variety of clubs: chess, music, crafts
- ✓ Study groups: languages, computers, math
- ✓ Sports and intramurals: basketball, ping pong, wrestling, gymnastics
- ✓ Community service opportunities: clean-up, baby-sitting, volunteering

Community service is the act of making a condition or situation better because of personal involvement, following the construction of a given plan for that purpose. Students benefit from activities that provide service to the community or the school. The classroom is a comfortable and safe place to experiment with the design of plans to help improve conditions and the quality of life for others.

All activities should support the changing physical, social, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of the young adolescent. Intramurals, which insure that all interested students participate, most strongly support the middle grades mission. Interscholastic activities included as part of the activities program should also support the middle grades mission.

Professional Development

Professional Development: Middle grades staff continue their own education through formal staff development, networking, personal study, and research.

Staff development supports effective instruction. Therefore, middle grades teachers must be provided opportunities to continue their own education. Middle grades teachers need to keep alive their connections to continued professional development. Teachers also need to make and develop a network of cohorts with whom middle grades dialogue and debate may add to and continue their development as effective teachers. Groups of teachers should be engaged in review of current writings and gathering information which will allow for increased instructional effectiveness and team proficiency.

Professional development should be directly related to a teacher's individual growth.

Just as a middle grades program should have a mission and goals; middle grades teachers should develop personal goals and vision. It is important for teachers to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Professional development should be directly related to a teacher's individual growth and growth should be evident in his or her performance in the classroom.

The professional development of the building leadership must also be ongoing. The middle grades leadership supports ongoing change and solutions to immediate and long range problems while reflecting the needs of the young adolescent. New ideas and methods need to be entertained as potential positive input to support an already well functioning program. Leadership allows for optimum involvement by teachers in discussions relating to instructional and programmatic change.

Family Community, and School Relationships

*Communication between the
community and the school
is the key to a successful
relationship.*

Family, Community, and School Relationships: Caring for middle grades students takes a combined effort by the school, the family, and the community.

The role of a quality middle grades program in the community is one of supporting both the mission of the middle grades and the hopes and wants of those people who make up the community. The stability of the middle grades curriculum can improve the confidence of the community in the schools. This stability can be illustrated by student conduct in and out of school. There is a need to make the community and parents aware of the goals and activities of the middle grades program and those areas that the community can help to develop. This information is usually gained through informal means.

Building a positive community school relationship will benefit both the community and the school. Communication between community and the school is the key to a successful relationship. A greater understanding of young adolescent behavior by the community helps the community understand why certain program activities are needed. Exploring the social phenomenon of middle grades students “running in herd” should help alleviate initial fears of store owners. Young adolescents need a social arena and where one is not provided they will create one. The traveling pack of middle grades students is, therefore, a normal situation. This traveling is done on foot because of the lack of a driver’s license and therefore the normal situation gives the appearance of being more threatening than is its reality.

The middle grades program must remain responsible to constituents. The beginning of the year and the end of the year are favorite times for reporting and asking for community involvement. A master plan listing upcoming events for the school year with extended invitations to students, student care providers and the total community needs to be provided by the educators of the

middle grades program during the summer of the upcoming year. The local paper, cable television and flyers in local businesses can be used to invite persons to view ongoing events.

Middle grades students often go home after a day at school to an empty house. These students perceive themselves to be too old for child care and are often too young for a job; they are caught in between with no adult supervision after school. In this age range, unsupervised students are at risk for experimenting with inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors. Middle grades educators, in partnership with the community and parents, can provide important leadership and direction in finding or organizing after school activities or recreational programs for middle grades students.

The community can understand curriculum goals that are visible in the everyday activities of their lives. Middle grades civic service projects that incorporate the best of learning on the part of future citizens and deliberately underscore responsible behavior on the part of the young adolescents are of extreme value. A project outside the building carries a visual image. For example, the improving of landscaping of the school grounds provides a way to illustrate the use of academia in realistic situations. The reason for learning becomes very clear to the young adolescent and the community when tangible products are presented for observation and discussion by those who live near the school. It is possible that all learning may not lead to a community service project, but certainly there are many more situations that can be developed when community and educators put their work together.

Educating the whole child requires guidance from everyone in the child's life. The young adolescent is looking for models and ideals to believe in. If the school and the community can coordinate their efforts for the good of the students, then time and resources can be used more effectively.

Developing A Nebraska Middle Grades Program

An Approach for Getting Started

The process for creating a quality middle grades program begins with a vision for better meeting the educational needs of very diverse young adolescent students.

An Approach for Getting Started

Across Nebraska, a variety of schools exists which, like their students, exhibit great diversity. Therefore, it should be noted that a particular middle grades program is not advocated as the “ideal” or model program for all Nebraska schools. The development of a quality middle grades program is a process that interested schools must undertake individually, grasping the expectations and goals of their families and the uniqueness of their local communities. The variety in local circumstances will result in a variety of quality middle grades programs, each working toward meeting their mission and goals.

Separate middle school buildings are not necessary to house quality middle grades programs. Many Nebraska communities do not have the luxury of initiating a quality middle grades program by constructing a separate school building and hiring an “all new” middle grades staff. Most Nebraska schools will build their programs on the foundation that quality middle grades programs are a concept, rather than a place. Nebraska schools will demonstrate, in a wide variety of grade configurations, that quality middle grades programs exist in their schools. This guide is intended to assist Nebraska schools in developing quality middle grades programs by advocating that certain indicators of quality are implemented.

The process for creating a quality middle grades program begins with a vision for better meeting the educational needs of very diverse young adolescent students. From there, it progresses under the leadership of dedicated principals, faculty, boards, and families. Schools may find the following guideline, *An Approach for Getting Started*, a useful navigator in steering their planning, priorities and decisions toward a quality middle grades program.

GUIDELINE FOR DEVELOPING A MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAM

AN APPROACH FOR GETTING STARTED

PLANNING AND MAKING THE COMMITMENT

- ✓ Conduct Research On Middle Grades Education
- ✓ Hold Informational Meetings With Community, Board, and Staff
- ✓ Identify Resources
- ✓ Obtain Administrative and Board Commitment
- ✓ Assure Administrative Leadership for the Middle Grades Program

IDENTIFY A LEADERSHIP TEAM

- ✓ Coordinate With Current School Improvement Initiatives
- ✓ Design A Time Line
- ✓ Share Research, Literature, Best Practices
- ✓ Identify Local Uniqueness, Expectations, Demographics
- ✓ Obtain Staff Involvement, Commitment, Ownership
- ✓ Encourage Family and Community Involvement, Commitment, Ownership

DEVELOP THE MIDDLE GRADES MISSION

- ✓ Build upon Vision for Successful Students
- ✓ Establish Goals and High Expectations
- ✓ Develop a Mission Statement

DEVELOP THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

- ✓ Support Middle Grades Mission
- ✓ Develop Long and Short Range Goals
- ✓ Address Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Assessment
- ✓ Assure A Supportive Staff
- ✓ Design Schedule Responsive to Middle Grades Students
- ✓ Identify Student Support Services
- ✓ Include Family and Community
- ✓ Provide Appropriate Staff Development and Training

CONTINUING THE COMMITMENT

- ✓ Integrate With Other Local School Improvement Activities
- ✓ Provide Continuous Staff Development Opportunities
- ✓ Assess Student Progress
- ✓ Conduct Program Evaluation

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